

## *Preface*

If only they  
had turned off the television  
and tune into their own imaginations

—Pedro Pietri, “Puerto Rican Obituary,” 1969

Save Our Youth (SOY), the most treasured literary project of Red Salmon Arts (RSA), has a longstanding history of nurturing, developing, and promoting literature with youth who are “hard to reach” and/or belong to underrepresented communities. Members of the RSA staff and collective have taken these unique writing/healing workshops, that also incorporate music and visual arts, into the Austin and surrounding area’s public schools and juvenile justice facilities. Often in conjunction with local and regional arts organizations, this program cultivates and supports organic ways of learning and knowing.

In these times where local, state, and federal governments are slashing arts and cultural programs in our public schools, English teacher Ken Zarifis’ invitation to conduct SOY intensive writing clinics with his eighth-grade English class at Burnet Middle School in Austin was especially salient. Internationally renowned poet Raúl Salinas, Founder and Director of Red Salmon Arts, and I co-facilitated several writing clinics with these students from October to December of last year. Inspired by Raúl’s holistic teaching method, we collectively brought an energy and spirit that transformed the classroom into a safe space where we could all become writers, poets, and story- and truth- tellers. By asking the students to draw from their own life-stories to write poems or “medicine stories,” as Raúl calls them, of liberation, empowerment, and healing these young authors envisioned, created, and presented poetry that reflected their experiences, memories, and histories.

This anthology, *So Look at Me Now*, which borrows its title from a line in the poem, “Leaving the Past Behind,” by LaTonya

Bell, represents the focus, vivacity, and creativity of these workshops. Indeed, we used an open dialogue approach, along with an emphasis on cultural awareness and pride, to breakdown the writing process. We shared with students not only the style and mechanics of poetry, but featured free verse, spoken word films, and music to expose them to a broad range of literary forms. In this instance, these emerging poets did heed the late Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri's advice to "tune into their own imaginations" to write poetry that explores stories of migration, pain, love, growing-up, heroism, homeland, and family to voice those matters that often go unsaid.

We would like to express our sincerest thanks to Ken Zarifis for opening up his classroom and overseeing his students through this project. Muchísimas gracias to cultural worker and RSA Administrator Rene Valdez for arranging the writing clinics and providing invaluable feedback in the editing of the collection; to visual artist/poet/musician ezequiel peña-banegas for assisting with the workshops; to critically-acclaimed muralist Raúl Valdez for the evocative and powerful cover art and graphic design; and to Edgar Acuña whose illustration was the inspiration for the cover. Finally, many thank yous/mil gracias to the young authors of Burnet Middle School for their ganas/enthusiasm and dedication to the creation of this endeavor.

Let's all be truth-tellers!

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